

HARVARD UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL VOICE PRINCIPLES

Frequently Asked Questions

Last spring, Harvard established the [Institutional Voice Working Group](#) to consider whether and when our institution should issue official statements on publicly salient issues. The Working Group consisted of faculty members from across the University with a wide range of experience and expertise. This group researched past practices at Harvard and other universities and conducted extensive outreach to the Harvard community, gathering input from every school and from more than 1,000 faculty, students, staff, and alumni.

In May 2024, the Working Group produced a thoughtful [report](#) that grounds the use of institutional voice in the University’s mission of “seeking truth through open inquiry, debate, and the careful weighing of evidence.” The report emphasizes that University leaders should speak publicly on matters directly relevant to Harvard’s core function as an academic institution—matters on which they can speak with credibility by virtue of their institutional roles and expertise. The report underscores the importance of upholding open inquiry and academic freedom and cautions that making official statements on issues beyond leadership’s core institutional functions may undermine free expression within our community, making it “more difficult for some members of the community to express their views when they differ from the university’s official position.” By embracing institutional restraint, the report reinforces the University’s role as a place of debate, discussion, and constructive disagreement.

University leadership [has adopted](#) the recommendations and principles outlined in the Working Group report. Many questions will arise in applying these recommendations and principles in practice. The following FAQs, which are primarily drawn from questions received after the report’s issuance, are a starting point for application of the recommendations and principles, offering preliminary guidance to members of Harvard’s community.¹ We expect to clarify, refine, and augment this guidance based on community feedback and experience gained through implementation of the Institutional Voice Principles.

1. To whom do the Institutional Voice Principles apply?

The Institutional Voice Principles apply to anyone who serves in an administrative or academic leadership role representing the University or its constituent parts. This includes the President; Provost; Deans of Faculties, Schools, Divisions, Houses, and other academic units; other Senior Administrators; Department Chairs; and Directors of Programs, Centers, Institutes, and Clinics (referred to throughout as “University leaders”).

The higher the rank of a University leader, the more likely it is that others will tend to conflate the statements of that leader with those of the institution, whether or not those statements include an explicit disclaimer that the leader is speaking in an unofficial capacity. Experience has also shown, however, that even those who do not occupy high ranking University or School-wide leadership positions, including Directors of Centers and Programs, are often portrayed as speaking for the institution or one of its components.

¹ The President, Provost, Executive Vice President, and the Deans of the Faculties, the Schools, the College, the Harvard Radcliffe Institute, and the Division of Continuing Education have reviewed and approved this initial guidance.

Therefore, the Institutional Voice Principles encourage restraint by all holding administrative or academic leadership positions.

2. When do University leaders speak on behalf of the university?

For purposes of the Institutional Voice Principles, any statements by a University leader (in their official capacity) are considered as official statements. Formal remarks as well as written communications constitute statements for the purposes of the Institutional Voice Principles. Further, statements include any communication issued through official University channels by someone ostensibly speaking on behalf of the institution or one of its components. For example, a University-wide email from the Office of the President is considered an official statement. Similarly, a School Dean issuing a community message or a Center Director making an announcement on the Center's website is issuing an official statement.

Presidents, Provosts, Vice Presidents, and Deans (including Deans of Faculties, Schools, Divisions, or Houses, as well as Vice, Deputy, Associate, and Assistant Provosts, and Deans) should presume they will be understood to be speaking in their official capacities because it is difficult for members of our community or the public to differentiate whether they are acting in a personal or an official capacity when they speak. As such, the Institutional Voice Principles encourage particular restraint by those holding such administrative or academic leadership positions.

3. When can University leaders speak on their own behalf?

When officials in leadership positions also serve, as they often do, as academics with field expertise, the Institutional Voice Principles do not preclude them from offering their substantive views in their area of academic expertise, provided that they clearly identify that they are not speaking on behalf of the University. For example, Directors of Centers, Programs, and Institutes, and Department or Area Chairs, whose work as such is often intertwined closely with their areas of academic expertise, are typically selected because they are experts—and perhaps leaders—in a given field. Their subject matter expertise (e.g., climate, health, international, human rights, gender, race, etc.) will often be implicated by publicly salient events.

They may therefore make public statements within their area of academic expertise, including through op-ed pieces, interviews, or other public communications, but it should be clear in context that they are speaking as individuals, not on behalf of the University or one of its components. For example, if Directors of Programs, Centers, or Institutes, or Department and Area Chairs identify themselves by their leadership titles when speaking or writing on matters within their domain expertise, they should also indicate that they are not speaking for their institutional unit. Faculty-affiliated op-eds or interviews may be linked to on a Center, Program, or Institute website, blog, or newsletter if the Center, Program, or Institute regularly features public communications in that way. A Director should not, however, post their own statement of position as such on the Center, Program, or Institute website, as it is likely to be understood as an official position of that Harvard entity.

Please also see policies concerning [Use of Harvard's Name](#).

4. What are statements relevant to the University's core function?

The Institutional Voice Principles insist that University leaders such as the President, Provost, or Deans have a responsibility to speak to issues that directly affect the University's core function. The Principles

elaborate that “[University] leaders must communicate the value of the university’s central activities. They must defend the university’s autonomy and academic freedom when threatened—if, for example, outside forces seek to determine what students the university can admit, what subjects it can teach, or which research it supports. And they must speak out on issues directly relevant to the university’s operation.”

The expectation of speaking on matters within the University’s “core function” does not, however, refer to official statements on matters within a School’s or unit’s substantive expertise. Rather, that expectation goes to questions that touch the University’s work as an institution of higher learning, including admissions, faculty hiring, curriculum, protection of academic freedom, or the importance of public support for academic research. This would have included, for example, matters such as the recent admissions litigation or the impact of the federal travel ban on students and faculty, matters plainly within the core function of the University. Note that in cases implicating core functions, the Institutional Voice Principles do not address the important further question of who has the authority to speak for the University or one of its components on a particular matter relating to its core functions.

Conversely, the University and its leaders should avoid issuing substantive statements that advocate for a particular policy position unrelated to the University’s core function. That might include, for example, the School of Public Health’s issuing an official endorsement or opposition to the enactment of the Affordable Care Act or the Economics Department’s issuing a statement articulating a departmental position on monetary policy or tax cuts. See also FAQ 8 below.

5. Would natural disasters fall into the core functions category? What about acts of mass violence or other events capturing significant public attention? If University leaders should not issue statements on such topics, what kinds of actions can be taken to provide support to communities particularly affected?

University leaders should not issue public statements on natural disasters, acts of mass violence, or other events capturing significant public attention unless they also raise issues concerning core University functions. Addressing some necessarily excludes others, and it is not possible for leaders to address all. Instead, Schools and units should identify ways for those with proximity to affected students, staff, or faculty to provide resources and support directly to those affected. This does not preclude University leaders from attending memorial events in such contexts to show support for those within our community who are affected.

The Institutional Voice Report also notes that the University should continue and expand the efforts of appropriate staff within its Schools and residential houses to provide pastoral support for community members affected by publicly salient events.

6. Can the Schools and the University develop avenues to continue supporting dialogue and discussion on issues of public importance?

Yes. Developing such avenues is consistent with the Institutional Voice Principles, reinforcing the role of an academic institution in fostering discussion, debate, and dialogue. Schools should support academic events and inquiry relating to questions of public importance—with care given to represent diverse viewpoints—that concern the community and might, in the past, have been the subject of public statements. Individual faculty members, moreover, should be encouraged to contribute their expertise and perspective

to dialogue and discussion on matters of public importance, as individuals, and nothing in the Institutional Voice Principles should be construed as constraining their academic freedom to do so.

7. When do actions constitute statements under the Institutional Voice Principles?

There is a small category of actions by University leaders that are necessarily and inherently expressive—such as flying a flag, making a salute, or signing a petition—and should be understood as statements. For example, a President’s or Dean’s flying a flag of a country at war from a University building is a statement. The Institutional Voice Principles, however, do not preclude flying a flag according to established University protocol when there is a visiting head of state or government on campus. Other actions, such as attendance at a memorial that acknowledges a public tragedy and honors and remembers lives lost, are not to be understood as statements. Hosting an academic conference or inviting a speaker does not constitute a statement for purposes of the Institutional Voice Principles.

8. For Programs, Centers, Institutes, and Clinics that engage in work that may be considered inherently advocacy-oriented, how do leaders of such units distinguish between impermissible official statements and permissible programming, events, imagery, and communications? Are there specific criteria such units should use when they do put out statements on mission-critical work?

The Institutional Voice Report acknowledges that some Programs, Centers, Institutes, and Clinics “translate knowledge into action through reports, white papers, and client representation.” Such units may engage in their ordinary academic work, including policy advocacy and recommendations in white papers or reports, but this work should reflect or link to evidence-based academic work or reasoning that is reflective of academic expertise, rather than relying on mere assertions or on statements based on appeals to the views of other groups.²

Student organizations are subject to the policies of the Schools at which they are based. Schools will work with student organizations to ensure that any statements by those groups follow School policies and are not framed as representing the positions or views of the University or its constituent parts.

9. How should the Institutional Voice Principles be understood with regard to the social media accounts of the University and its constituent parts? Does reposting content on social media constitute an endorsement of a statement or the content shared?

Material disseminated by official social media accounts, websites, email announcements, and other electronic communications channels of the University and its Schools or units are considered to be institutional products or statements. Consequently, care should be taken to avoid using them as avenues for issuing statements on matters that fall outside the University’s core function. Depending on how they are framed, most reposts of social media content are now understood to convey a statement either for or against the position taken in the original post.

² Legal advocacy documents, such as an amicus brief filed by a Harvard Law School Clinic, may raise distinct concerns. A brief filed on behalf of a non-Harvard client, or an individual Clinic director indicating that they are acting in their individual capacity, is not likely to be mistaken as an instance of Harvard advocating for one side in a legal dispute. By contrast, a brief filed on behalf of a Clinic itself might be, and thus ordinarily should be avoided.

10. Is it appropriate for a Department Chair to use the departmental newsletter to commend a faculty member's academic work?

Yes. A Department Chair or other leader may commend a scholar for the rigor, thoroughness, thoughtfulness, or policy impact of their work. Although the Chair or other leader may celebrate and emphasize the impact of research-based solutions affecting public policy, care should be taken not to suggest that the Department or other institutional unit endorses the policy position.

11. If a leader or unit wants to send out a communication on a particular issue but is not sure if it comports with the Institutional Voice Principles, is there a place to email with questions about specific situations?

The new Institutional Voice Principles will require a significant shift in approach for the University and its many Schools and units, and we understand that that will take some adjustment. Questions concerning implementation of the new Principles can be sent to institutionalvoice@harvard.edu.